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Beckett, C. J.

Overlapping, its varieties
and dangers

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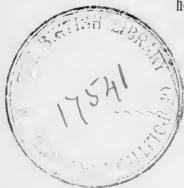
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OVERLAPPING : ITS VARIETIES AND DANGERS.

BY MR. C. J. BECKETT.

Paper read at the Twenty-fifth Annual Congress of Co-operative Societies
held at Bristol, May, 1893.



Manchester:

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Overlapping: Its Varieties and Dangers.

BY MR. C. J. BECKETT.

The duty which has been assigned to me is one to which I cheerfully respond, though, of course, my subject is not necessarily of my own choice. I am free to confess at the very outset that the tenor of my theme is not a very exalted one, nor is it yet marked by any great breadth of purpose, though its consideration may, and I think ought to, deepen our thought, and add wisdom to our meditations. If to some of you it should appear as scarce class enough for a Congress paper, because of its somewhat partial and parochial character and the limited extent to which overlapping prevails—though not so limited as would at first sight appear—let me say this for it in its defence: Your Central Board has deemed the question of sufficient importance to warrant its present introduction, whilst it possesses this superlative merit at least, viz., of neither being up in the clouds itself, nor need you beat the air in its discussion, and this is more, I am afraid, than can be said of all the subjects which have been brought under your notice, in recent years especially. Its undertones are affecting us in many ways, as I hope to demonstrate before I have done, is getting a firmer grip upon us because of its occult and insidious influence, and is prejudicially affecting both the character of our work and its utility in the very prosaic prose of our everyday life.

A FUNDAMENTAL AIM OF THE CO-OPERATIVE MOVEMENT—TO SUPPLANT
THE SYSTEM OF UNHEALTHY AND UNBRIDLED COMPETITION.

So much, then, by way of needful preface. Let me now lead you in thought and feeling to what, in my opinion, is one of the fundamental aims of our movement, and one which lies therefore at the very root of its being. The value and significance of our present day departure will thus become more manifest, but a departure, by the way, which is "wrought from want of thought more than from want of heart." If our movement possesses any significance at all, or has any potential value for good within its womb, it lies first of all in its unique ability to supplant by disuse all those multifarious intermediate agencies which exist at the present time—agencies which stand between the humble

producer on the one hand and that equally humble consumer of his products on the other, agencies which keep them wide as the poles asunder, instead of bringing them into closer correspondence and communion, and the existence and maintenance of which is no slight tax upon the industry of the one, and the cost of living of the other. In the sphere of distribution, for example, we find an enormous economic waste constantly going on for the lack of freer use of those improved and self-regulating methods of supply which it is our especial vocation to provide. We see shops being called into self-existence, and establishment charges created out of all proportion to the real needs of the community, to say nothing of the profit which is often made upon their working, and all of which has to be paid for—and dear is the price thereof—by the people by whom they are supported and maintained. And in the higher and more intricate domains of trade and commerce precisely the same waste is going on in the general race and scramble for wealth, and precisely the same loading charges for maintenance obtain. And it is in these fields of labour, and in the promotion of a more wise and just economy of exchange, that the work of our two Wholesale Societies and all other kindred institutions undoubtedly lie, as the necessary corollary and counterpart of what the retail stores are doing in the first but final stages of supply. To get a day's march nearer the producer is for them and for us to get a day's march nearer home. And here let me briefly interpolate the expression of this other thought, which will also help to clear the way for the more profitable consideration of our subject. The right to do as we please with our own, as we so fondly term it, has its circumscribed limits, and is conditioned by the circumstances under which we seek to exercise it. The right to trade as we please, for example, is one which has been voluntarily abrogated when we join hands with others for purposes of self-supply, our individual loyalty and that of our comrades forms the basis of our concerted action, and is of the very essence of success if the maximum good and the desired end has ever to be fully attained. And so in like manner and degree what is the reasonable service of a member to his store is but the measure of what is due from his store to the movement which has called it into being, and of which it forms an integral and essential part.

SOME OF THE CAUSES OF OVERLAPPING IN DISTRIBUTION.

We may now more freely consider some of the principal causes which give rise to overlapping, for it is these which lend tone and shape to their character and "variety," though the fact that overlapping exists at all is a left-handed compliment to our remarkable growth and progress. One of the most prolific sources of this evil as it exists in the sphere of co-operative distribution is the planting of individual societies, at the very threshold of their life, in too close a juxtaposition with each other, and the centrifugal

force of which becomes more accentuated as they each grow and develop. This relative proximity is also most marked in comparatively large societies with their ever-widening fields of operation. These not only come into contact and sharp collision with each other, but oftentimes with societies far less powerful than themselves, and of which more anon. Again, another of the causes which give rise to overlapping is the wantonness with which some societies (happily only a few) will go out of their way to catch trade and cater for it. Their fame has gone out and has got noised abroad. They are paying perhaps a larger, though not necessarily a better, dividend than is current in the locality, and so they are tempted, sometimes by invitation, to plant their hoof down in a spot where salutary self-restraint ought to have taught them that there at least the welfare of the movement forbade them to go. Their vanity has, however, been tickled, the prospect of enlarged borders and greater magnitude float in their imagination, even though their success should mean the proportionate decline of a co-operative neighbour whose claims upon them have too often been lost in the crowd of these more ambitious considerations. An unco-operative, and therefore an unhealthy, rivalry is thus created and fostered between the big brother, who is well able to take care of himself, and that lesser one, who has got quite as much as he can manage to do, and do it well, to fight the foe without, without having to also turn his attention to the larger foe within. The result is he invariably suffers, if he does not finally succumb, to an unequal conflict, and which has come from a source where it ought least of all to have been expected. It is due, however, to many of our large societies to state they are extremely careful not to occupy ground already wholly or partially covered by others, and particularly by small societies; and that when they have gone into virgin districts which have been far removed from the base of their operations, they have been ever ready to give effect to any broadly expressed desire for local self-government and control, and to transfer their interest in it to the society which may be formed as the fruition of the good work they have already accomplished. On the other hand, a fillip to overlapping is often given by the conservative timidity of some of our societies, and in their unwillingness to add to their natural responsibilities, even though it should meet a well-expressed demand for enlarged service and opportunity. The result is, societies sometimes spring up from inward propulsion rather than from choice owing to this want of foresight or lack of application, and another overlapping and overlapped society is thus added to the list, and which, as a rule, is not long in making its inconvenient nearness and presence felt. The evils of overlapping are also sometimes made more abundantly manifest by the creation of separate and distinct societies in different parts of one and the same borough, as in Blackburn with its eight societies to wit, and my own town with little less than this number. Then the sense of nearness is far more acute, and poaching often becomes a retaliatory process. But when,

alas, as sometimes happens, the existence of some of these is the direct outcome of a secession brought about by internal dissensions creeping into a society's government, then their aggravation is intensified an hundred-fold; then it becomes war to the knife: and though these can scarcely be said to come within the category of overlapping, as it is commonly understood, yet the effects of their rival existence are precisely of the same nature, only are far greater in degree. The wide disparity in the rates of dividend of comparatively neighbouring societies has much to answer for, in my estimation, and is one of the most prolific sources of this kind of mischief. When this difference is only to be determined by shillings in the pound—never mind the penny—one need not wonder at the unrest and disquietude which too often finds expression in ways and actions deeply to be lamented.

THE LIKE INFLUENCES AT WORK IN PRODUCTION.

Leaving now the sphere of distribution, and turning our attention to that of production, we find precisely the same influences at work, though not proceeding from identically the same causes, and it is these influences which it is the all-important thing for us to consider, their source being only of the second degree. As you all know, the attention of our very last Congress was directed to the need for greater harmony and economy in the administration and conduct of our various productive enterprises, in a very thoughtful and intelligent paper by our friend, Mr. Deans, upon the subject, and which has since been taken up by the Productive Committee of the Union as the direct outcome of the discussion which then took place upon the matter. Productive societies, I am sorry to say, have been, and are now, often called into existence without sufficient regard being paid in their embryonic state as to how far the ground they seek to occupy is already covered by others, and without adequate thought being given to those essential conditions which are absolutely requisite to ensure success. Well-meant efforts—would they were as well-advised—have thus been launched into the co-operative world in all their frailty, and, as a consequence, many of them languish, if they do not altogether sicken and die from premature birth. Born out of due time in anticipation of a demand which though mingled does not also exist, they hope somehow to survive and flourish, though how they do not exactly know. If their projection into life had but been the outcome of an imperative call to existence, and if supply had thus waited upon demand instead of frequently preceding it, and if, better still, their sustenance could have been effectively secured and maintained within such self-expressed area, and without coming into conflict with other kindred organisations, then all would doubtless have been well, and the present tension and friction would never have arisen. But lacking for the most part these essential and harmonic elements, they are forced, much against their will, to

wend their way here, there, and everywhere with aimless step and wasteful purpose in search of a trade, and for which they too often search in vain.

ONE OF ITS MANY RESULTANT CONSEQUENCES.

It thus not unfrequently happens that the various buyers of our retail stores are at times somewhat perplexed if not bewildered in the rival co-operative wares which their respective exhibitors now and again offer them for sale, and in the not very edifying spectacle they present as they each seek custom for one and the same commodity at one and the same counter. In pops, for example, the boot and shoe traveller of the Wholesale Society on this side of the Tweed; that he sings, as is his duty, to the praise of the Wheatheaf brand, and in the major key, too, goes without saying. But no sooner has he taken his departure than the representative of another Leicester co-operative boot and shoe making establishment appears upon the scene; he it is who has got the genuine article, for are not co-operators told "they should wear only boots and shoes of the Reliable Eagle brand"? And to make the diversion still more complete, up turns Kettering amongst a host of others may be, and puts in its own little modest claim to an order, for are not all the best boots and shoes made in their famous county?—ergo, you should only go to Leicestershire for feet preservers when you cannot possibly get them in Northamptonshire. Or is it woollen cloths that are wanted, then there are no Tweeds like those from Selkirk (did anything bad ever come out of Scotland?), no home-spuns like those of Batley Mill, and no suppers like those which come from Thomson's of Huddersfield. Should it be the inner man, however, which needs replenishing, then there is Nutritional Cocoa, the co-operative production," on the one hand, and the Wholesale Societies' Cocoa on the other, and which, though it lays no distinctive claim to nutritiousness, doubtless equally possesses it all the same. And so the otherwise merry round goes on. Some day those of my own calling, the scribes, I hope, not the pharisees of the movement, may possibly find themselves in the like dilemma. Mr. Hyde, of the Co-operative Printers, in Corporation-street, will, of course, call upon us as usual, but then Dr. Jekyll may afterwards turn up, perhaps in the person of Mr. Hyde's other self, like that interesting dual individual in R. L. Stevenson's psychological story, with his samples also, from the adjoining street, so that we can have C.P.S. or C.W.S. productions as is best preferred, or even blended if we desire it, should we happen to represent one of the many societies who have an interest in them both. Some of our corn mills, Rochdale and Oldham to wit, are, I fancy, just a shade too close to each other to be altogether wise and prudent. This at least is certain, that when Oldham's "Star" was invisible Rochdale's "Weir" held a better trade, and there flowed from it far greater profits than was usual when both were catering for our business.

THE EFFECTS OF OVERLAPPING IN REGARD TO THE GENERAL WEAL
OF THE MOVEMENT.

(1) *The potency of the movement is weakened and warped.*

Having thus traversed some of the chief causes of overlapping, let me now direct your attention to some of their effects, and of which "danger" is but one important embodiment of their outward expression. In the first place the potency of our movement is being undoubtedly weakened by it, for we are introducing those very evils into it which it is our especial function to mitigate, if not to altogether destroy—evils which only gain momentum from the force of numbers and united effort. The result is we are needlessly creating both friction and expense by an economic waste of our resources. The way to an Englishman's heart is often said to be through the medium of his pocket, but this, perhaps, is a libel upon the character of John Bull. This at least is true, and we should do well to never forget it, though we may deplore it all the same, viz., that the monetary gains which come to our members from their association with us is one of the chief causes of our phenomenal progress and development, and whenever this becomes inappreciably manifest a large proportion of their trade will assuredly take to itself wings and fly away. Where societies, by overlapping, are more or less rent in twain, there the language of a cry, "We can do better elsewhere," is mostly heard; whilst the reverse is also true, that in places where societies are firmly planted, rightly governed, and compactly exist, the moaning cry has lost its language, because it has lost any semblance of a cause for its expression. We do ourselves a great injustice, and our movement a great wrong, therefore, when we thus expend its resources in an unnecessary multiplication of its machinery for the accomplishment of its purposes. Some societies are in this way built up, partly at the expense of others, and many of whom need added strength themselves, rather than to have some of the strength they already possess ruthlessly taken from them.

(2) *Encourages a desire for large dividends, and undermines our stability.*

In the second place, overlapping fosters an unhealthy desire for large dividends, with its ever increasing tendency to make store prices somewhat out of touch with those ruling around them. An appetite which needs no whetting is thus aroused, and the more it is aroused the worse it often is to appease. I have known of the downfall of one society at least more from this cause than from any other, and a society of over thirty years' standing, too. Hemmed in on every hand by other societies who commenced to pay larger dividends than itself, in an evil moment it followed suit. Stocks began to be tampered with, and accounts kept back from the quarter's charge. Dividends which had never been fully earned thus began

to be paid, and which it seemed forced to pay if it would live. It only postponed the evil day, however. The climax came, as sure it would, and the society was lost beyond hope of redemption. Co-operative competition largely killed it, and another failure, mostly of our own making, was entered against us by the recording angel of "The Grocer." I know of others, too, who have had their stability seriously undermined from precisely the same cause, from their sheer inability to withstand the pressure which what ought to have been kindred societies has forced upon them, and to such a length has this jealous rivalry been sometimes carried, as to actually cause societies before now to keep back the declaration of their own dividend until that of their nearest neighbour has been revealed unto them.

(3) *Leads to a disregard of the duties which co-operators owe to each other.*

It is this very disregard of the duties men owe to each other in all the relationships of life, from their violation of the golden rule of "doing unto others as they would others should do unto them," which lies at the root of much of our present social indigestion and unrest, and which gives birth to some of those Utopian dreams which are born of the night, and are not of the day. And we ourselves, especially when we overlap each other, are doing something, however little, to foster this spirit amongst us. We are loosening the ties of membership, when we ought rather to bind and cement them, for they are none too strong even with the best of us, are consolidating by disintegrating, whilst yet seeking to teach our members that their store is not an institution outside themselves, and are tempting them to transfer their allegiance from one society to that of another with perfect nonchalance, and without any regard to the added responsibilities they may have left behind them in their flight and transmigration. We thus warp our own power for good by the introduction of these weakening and warring elements.

(4) *Narrows the aims and deadens the sympathies of co-operators.*

Lastly, overlapping where it exists in an acute form is taking all the co-operative verve and "go" out of societies. In the daily struggle for existence, their sympathies and aspirations become "cribbed, cabined and confined," their store gets to be the only world in which they live, and around which their interest revolves, and a very narrow world it sometimes is to be sure. The higher aims of the movement, and of which their store life is but the first unfolding, gradually recedes from view. Co-operative isolation, a contradiction of terms, sets in until at last they bar the door to the introduction of all other demands upon them. (See appendix.) The need for education, and they of all men most need it, lies unsupplied. The claims of all other forms of co-operative effort to their help, devotion, and service fall upon deaf ears, or

they lie forgotten as a dream. They do nothing to sustain them, nothing to give them potency and life. The things they ought most to welcome are the very things they most eschew. At conference and Congress they are generally conspicuous by their absence, when I would they were more frequently present if only that they might learn to

rise as stepping stones
On their dead selves to higher things.

SUGGESTED REMEDIES.

I have now traversed, to the best of my ability, the duty assigned to me, and yet I feel I should fall short of it if I did not add one or two closing words by way of remedial suggestion. To those of you who have poached or sinned in any way in this respect I would say, undo your doing as far as lies in your power. Fling away your nets, and poach no more. Fuse the warring atoms where possible by compact cohesion, and cease to present the spectacle of two rival brothers fighting for the same trade, and maiming themselves both in the process. Where overlapping may not be a very present danger, and even where it does exist in a mild form, be wise in time; map out your territory by mutual agreement, and beyond which neither of you shall go, and call in the ever-ready aid of your Union if need be for its accomplishment, for it has been already successful in doing much in this direction—notably in the case of the Manchester and Salford, Pendleton, and Eccles Societies. Remove one of the most powerful incentives to overlapping by agreeing to conduct your business upon more common lines. Do not seek for uniformity of dividend, for that you can never attain, but try at least to have less disparity amongst you than exists at present, and especially where overlapping may threaten your environment. And above and beyond all this let us spread amongst ourselves a wider and more lucid perception and appreciation of those inherent principles which lie at the root of our movement, for our success has been greater than our wisdom and our progress than our knowledge, and let us seek to possess a greater indwelling of the true co-operative spirit, both amongst ourselves and in each other, and a readier alacrity to obey its dictates. Let there be a greater willingness to seek our own good only in that of our fellows, and that needful desire which shall constrain us to sacrifice ourselves in the good of others rather than sacrifice the good of others in that of our own. Overlapping and all other excrescences which may creep into our system will then settle themselves, for there will be ever present with us that abiding sense of duty which shall keep our feet from falling and which shall restrain us from doing anything to mar our fair fame or cause its name to become a ready reproach upon the lips of our enemies. I have only to add that I am not altogether free from misgiving as to the

visdom of probing our wounds and baring our sores in this way, and because of the danger lest they should appear greater in our own eyes, and especially in those of the on-looking public, than they really are. If the probing of the wound shall but have the effect, however, of its speedy healing, by a prompt removal of the causes which have given rise to it, then this paper of mine will not have been penned in vain, nor will your consideration of it be devoid of any good purpose.

APPENDIX.

EXTRACT FROM THE REPORT OF THE NORTH-EAST LANCASHIRE DISTRICT ASSOCIATION TO LAST CONGRESS.

At the last joint meeting with the Sectional Board we pointed out that the societies in this district were suffering very much from overlapping, and from whom we afterwards received a communication, offering to give assistance to any of the societies that were favourable to amalgamation. The letter was laid before my executive, and they decided to make another effort, by issuing a circular to all the societies in the district who are affected by overlapping. The following circular was issued to nineteen societies, with the result that only five replies were received. Three societies—viz., Accrington and Church, Darwen, and Barrowford Progressive were favourable to amalgamation, whilst the other two societies had no desire to amalgamate with any other society. Copy of circular:—

December 15th, 1891.

GENTLEMEN,—The evils arising from overlapping, a practice which is on the increase, and involving needless friction and expense, has frequently occupied the attention of the above association, whilst they have received the recent consideration of one of our district conferences. In addition, we have also had our attention drawn to it by the sectional board, suggesting amalgamation as a remedy for the evils, in all those towns and places where this unhealthy rivalry and competition between societies is known to exist. As overlapping extensively prevails, and as amalgamation is of course impossible without a consensus of opinion in its favour, especially on the part of the committees, I am desired by our executive to ask if the committee of your society would kindly favour them with their views upon this subject, and especially as to whether they would be willing as a committee to co-operate in any well considered proposal for the attainment of this object. In this event our executive would be pleased to use their good offices to bring the various committees together for the purpose of taking friendly consultations and council thereon.

Enclose stamped directed envelope for reply, and should be pleased to hear from you if possible not later than 31st January next.—Yours faithfully,

SAM KENYON, District Secretary.

The italics are mine.—C. J. B.

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